



#### Office Locations:

Alexander City, Auburn,  
Birmingham, Brewton,  
Eufaula, Gadsden,  
Huntsville, Mobile,  
Thomasville, Tuscaloosa,  
Tuscumbia

ALABAMA TECHNOLOGY NETWORK (ATN) Serving firms throughout Alabama via 10 regional centers. Contact: John Shields, President, 500 Beacon Parkway West Birmingham AL, 35209, (205) 943-4797, Fax: (205) 943-4813, Email: jshields@atn.org, Website: <http://www.atn.org/>

## THE MANUFACTURING EXTENSION PARTNERSHIP IN ALABAMA

Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) is a nationwide system of services and support for smaller manufacturers to become more globally competitive. At the heart of the system is a network of affiliated, locally-based manufacturing extension centers. Each center, like ATN, is a partnership, typically involving federal, state, and local governments; industry; educational institutions; and other sources of expertise, information and funding support.

### COMPANY CLIPS

#### Axsys Technologies Improves Product Quality, Grows Business

Axsys Technologies is a manufacturer of guided missile components, a business that requires engineering and machining to very strict tolerances. The company's Cullman plant employs approximately 250 machinists and management staff members. Axsys Technologies has a contract to polish mirror material for the United States Army's Tank Division. Machine polishing the mirror material requires such exact temperature standards that variations of even one degree Fahrenheit in the polishing room are unacceptable. Axsys' existing HVAC system would not meet the tolerances, which resulted in defective products. Axsys failed its final inspection. To help solve the problem and save its business, the company called in the experts at the Birmingham Center of the Alabama Technology Network (ATN).

ATN made an assessment of the current system and formulated detailed recommendations for corrective action. ATN's technical staff studied the system, paying particular regard to the milling machine's placement relative to the feed/return ducting and register orientation. ATN detailed new placements and contracted local HVAC firms to make the necessary changes to the structure.

The milling process, relocated to the Cullman plant from a sister Axsys facility, was incapable of producing finished products to meet demanding military standards. The defects were caused by the fluctuation in air temperatures resulting from the existing heating and air conditioning system in the Cullman facility. By correcting the problem, Axsys Technologies completely eliminated production of defective products and now provides quality gear to the U.S. Armed Forces. The company additionally saved \$290,000 in the cost of rework, wasted materials, and labor—money that is now applied to the company's bottom line.

*Continued*

### STATE STATS

DATA\* COVERS JANUARY TO DECEMBER 2001

Number of projects completed  
with firms  
**419**

Number of firms served  
**713**

Number of firms served for  
the first time  
**205**

Federal cost share for current  
operating year  
**\$1,766,700**

State/other cost share for current  
operating year  
**\$3,533,400**

*\*Data as reported from center*

DATA\*\* COVERS JANUARY TO DECEMBER 2001

Increased sales & retained sales  
**\$166,786,000**

Client capital investment  
**\$31,048,500**

Total cost savings  
**\$14,984,000**

Jobs (created & retained)  
**2061**

*\*\*Source: Independent client impact survey*



**At SimsBark, a Safer Workplace is in the Bag**

SimsBark, founded in 1974, is a landscaping material manufacturer specializing in bagging pine and hardwood bark mulch for retail sale. SimsBark is the sole supplier of bagged mulch for Wal-Mart SuperStores, its largest client. The company employs a total of 107 people at two plants, one in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, and one in Mississippi.

When SimsBark increased the volume of its business with Wal-Mart, it unfortunately doubled its accident rate, consequently tripling its workman's compensation insurance. With a 60 percent Hispanic workforce, the company needed to find a bilingual safety training program. SimsBark contacted the Alabama Technology Network (ATN) for assistance. ATN conducted a comprehensive safety and health compliance assessment and, based on its findings, provided baseline OSHA training to selected supervisors in an English and Spanish format to accommodate the mostly Hispanic workforce.

ATN observed numerous deficiencies during its compliance assessment that needed immediate correction. To address them promptly, ATN helped SimsBark hire a full-time bilingual safety and health coordinator. ATN worked with the coordinator to rewrite any deficient safety and health programs, correct the deficiencies throughout the plant, and conduct extensive bilingual training for all SimsBark employees. SimsBark committed to eight hours of assistance per month for one year, thereby allowing ATN to continue to train the safety manager to implement programs, provide topics for weekly safety meetings, conduct plant walkthroughs, and provide translation of written programs into an all-Spanish format. As a result of this work, SimsBark reduced its accident rate by 50 percent and its workman's compensation insurance rate by over \$90,000.